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ABSTRACT

The need to find which social contexts elicit children's fullest language repertoire generated this study of the effects of three social distance variables on language production, as measured by mean length of communication unit, vocabulary diversity, and use of black English. The social distance variables investigated included race and sex of adult questioners, socioeconomic status of adult questioners, and sociceconomic status of subjects. The Semantic Differential Scale of Social Distance (SDSD), an original measurement instrument, was administered to 48 black, sixth-grade males from two socioeconomic groups. Later, subjects conversed on the topic of television with adult interviewers, of various sexes and races, to whom they were randomly assigned. A three-way interaction design accommodated the three social distance factors, and SDSD attitude scores were correlated with mean length of communication unit and use of black English. Subjects conversing with black adults were found to use black English to a greater degree. No other main effects or interaction effects were found to be significant. It was hypothesized that mean length of communication unit and vocabulary diversity were governed by the subjects' underlying linguistic patterns, whereas the use of black English was governed by social rules which promoted solidarity with the black interviewers. (Author/RS)

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Language Production as a Function of Social Distance

Dr. Thalia Pappas Silverman

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Abstract

The need to find which social contexts elicit children's fullest language repertoire generated this study of the effects of three social distance variables: race and sex (of adult) and socioeconomic status, SES (of subject) on subjects' language production as measured by: (a) mean length of communication unit, (b) vocabulary diversity, and (c) use of Black English. The Semantic Differential Scale of Social Distance (SDSD), developed by the investigator, was administered to 48 black sixth grade males in two SES groups. Later, subjects, randomly assigned to adults varying in race and sex, conversed on the topic of television. SDSD data were entered on a correlation matrix. A three-way interaction design accommodated the three social distance variables. SDSD attitude scores correlated with mean length of communication unit and use of Black English. Only one main effect of race on the use of Black English was statistically significant in favor

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of subjects conversing with black adults. No other main effects or any interaction effects were significant. The investigator posited that mean length of communication unit and vocabulary diversity were governed by the subjects' underlying linguistic rules, whereas, the use of Black English was governed by underlying social rules which signaled solidarity with black adults.

When the social distance is as great as in the case of a white, middle class experimenter questioning a lower class black child, the imbalanced social context may render the child speechless. It is therefore imperative to structure a wide variety of social contexts in which the child can express her/his fullest verbal repertoire. To provide environments fostering children's maximal fluency, educational planners must review findings of ethnographic and sociolinguistic researchers on the effects of social context variables on language (Bernstein, 1972; Gumperz and Herasimchuk, 1973; John, 1963; Labov, 1968).

Background and Hypotheses

To provide a framework for analyzing language in its social context, Hymes (1971) extended the sociolinguistic view of communicative competence to encompass sociocultural competence (the acquisition of social rules) as well as linguistic competence (the acquisition of syntactic rules). Several language researchers working within this broadened perspective have manipulated a number of social context variables

(e.g., race, sex, age, of participants) in order to study their effects on speakers' language production.

Ervin-Tripp (1964) as one condition in an experiment structured an abnormal social context with two Japanese women, restricted to the use of English while discussing "Japanese" topics. In this interaction, English for the bilingual subjects was most difficult; it was slow, disruptive, and brief. Labov (1969) arranged an interaction between two black males, a man and a child. Although both participants, indigenous to the community, knew one another well, the child's speech was restrained, limited, and simple. In a second verbal interaction, Labov reduced the social distance between the man and the boy by creating a party atmosphere, bringing along the child's best friend, and introducing taboo words and topics. Effects on the subject's speech were dramatic; he spoke more fluently, used a wider vocabulary, and handled abstract concepts with ease. Houston (1969) identified two social contexts which elicited distinct registers. In formal recording sessions, children used the School Register, characterized by short utterances,

slow speech, and limited content. By contrast, when Houston arranged an informal setting for a group of black children, the subjects used the Non-school Register, marked by naturalness of expression, fluency, and imaginative verbal play and story-telling. Gumperz and Hernandez-Chavez (1972) analyzed the natural conversation and language-switching of Spanish-English bilingual adults. Spanish was used to refer to personal feelings, Mexican-American experiences, Chicano friends, and matters of confidentiality. English was used to discuss impersonal, on-the-job topics. Bernstein (1972) contrasted working class with middle class socializing agencies (the family, the peer group, the school, and the work group) as social contexts which generated and controlled their members' language code. Bernstein found that working class groups preferred the restricted code with its rigid syntax, limited vocabulary, and heavy reliance on extraverbal communication. Middle class speakers instead promoted the use of the elaborated code, marked by wide-ranging flexibility in the selection of syntactic and lexical alternatives.

The findings of the cited studies suggest that the attitudes of one speaker toward characteristics

bearing social meaning (e.g., age, race, sex) of another speaker determine the degree of social distance between participants which, in turn, influences their verbal production. Because social distance is intrinsic to every verbal exchange, social distance attitude studies have implications for language-in-context research.

Bogardus (1933) originated a social distance scale designed to measure racial attitudes. The respondent marked a continuum ranging from intimate, at one end, to hostile, at the other end, in reference to a variety of relationships between himself and others (e.g., a friend, a neighbor, a spouse). The Bogardus Scale and modifications of it have been used to measure the social distance attitudes of (in-group) subjects toward the race, socioeconomic status, and other characteristics bearing social meaning of (out-group) stimuli (Triandis and Triandis, 1962; Webster, 1960; Westie and Howard, 1954).

Studies on social distance attitudes and studies on language in social context have been viewed as disparate areas of study. The present investigator combined perspectives from the two areas to provide a

broadened theoretical base for experimentally testing the relationship between children's social distance attitudes and their effects on language production.

The main purpose of the study was to test the major hypothesis that language production is a function of social distance. The hypothesis was tested in two parts. First, the investigator predicted in Hypothesis 1, that responses on a social distance scale and language measures would be significantly correlated. That is, the more positive (closer) the social distance scores as measured by The Semantic Differential Scale of Social Distance (SDSD), the higher the language production as measured by: (a) mean length of communication unit (MLCU), (b) vocabulary diversity (TTR), and (c) use of Black English (BE). In the second part of the study, the investigator explored the effects of three social distance variables: (a) RACE of adult, (b) SEX of adult, and (c) socioeconomic status (SES) of the subject on each language measure. Hypothesis 2 predicted that MLCU would be significantly higher for subjects conversing with black adults than for subjects conversing with white adults and that MLCU would be sig-

nificantly higher for subjects conversing with men than for subjects conversing with women. Hypothesis 3 predicted that TTR would be significantly higher for subjects conversing with black adults than for subjects conversing with white adults and that TTR would be significantly higher for subjects conversing with men than for subjects conversing with women. Hypothesis 4 predicted that BE would be significantly higher for subjects conversing with black adults than for subjects conversing with white adults and that BE would be significantly higher for subjects conversing with men than for subjects conversing with women. Hypothesis 5 predicted that mean length of communication unit and vocabulary diversity would be significantly higher for Mid SES than for Low SES subjects and that BE would be significantly higher for Low SES than for Mid SES subjects.

Procedure

The subjects were 48 sixth grade black males in three Berkeley, California intermediate publi schools and in two SES groups, Mid and Low. The SDSD, developed by the investigator to measure attitudes toward race and sex, consisted of four stimuli (portraits made of

felt) and four 5-point scales. The stimuli were: (1) portrait of a black female, (2) portrait of a white female, (3) portrait of a white male, and (4) portrait of a black male. The scales were: FOUL...COOL; UGLY... BEAUTIFUL; NASTY...FRIENDLY; UNFAIR...FAIR. A black male adult administered the SDSD to all subjects. No less than two weeks after they responded to the SDSD, subjects were randomly assigned to one of four treatment groups, as follows: Treatment 1: Black male adult; Treatment 2: Black female adult; Treatment 3: White male adult; and Treatment 4: White female adult. Each treatment group therefore, had 12 subjects (6 Mid and 6 SES) assigned to it. Each treatment group acted as a control for the other three treatment groups. Each interaction consisted of one twenty-minute audiotaped conversation between one adult and one subject on the topic of television. The adult introduced himself/ herself as a teacher and followed the guide questions provided by the investigator. Some questions were:

1. Which television programs stick in your mind?
2. Tell me about the last program (episode) you saw.
3. I haven't seen that program, can you tell me about it?

4. What happened next? Tell me some more.

Given the relatively controlled setting necessitated by the experiment, the television topic had several advantages. It was neutral, every boy watched television programs and could recall a number of details, the topic elicited spontaneous conversation and story-telling, and it was a topic children were willing to share with adults.

Transcripts were divided into communication units, then the mean length of communication unit per subject was recorded. Vocabulary diversity as measured by the type-token ratio was calculated for a 400-word sample from each transcript. Using a list of morphological and syntactical forms prepared by Ruddell (1974) Black English forms were identified and tallied for 100 communication units in each transcript. A ratio of BE forms per communication unit was then calculated by dividing the total number of BE forms by 100.

A three-way interaction design was selected to accommodate the three independent variables: (a) RACE

of adult, (b) SEX of adult, and (c) SES of subject. Analysis of the data consisted of a correlation matrix to test the first hypothesis and the use of univariate ANOVA for the remaining hypotheses, each tested beyond the .01 level of significance.

Results

Because the four SDSD scales were highly intercorrelated, they were combined into one composite scale measure. Since SDSD scores, as shown on Table 1, correlated at significant levels with two out of three language measures, Hypothesis 1 was accepted. That is, the more positive (closer) the SDSD responses, the longer the MLCU and the greater the use of BE. Conversely, the more negative (far apart) the SDSD responses, the shorter the MLCU and the lower the use of BE.

TABLE 1

CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS BETWEEN LANGUAGE PRODUCTION MEASURES AND RESPONSES TO THE SEMANTIC SCALE OF SOCIAL DISTANCE

Language Production	Scale Responses
Mean length of communication unit	.353*
Type-token ratio	-.214
Black English	.387**

*Significant beyond the .05 level.

**Significant beyond the .01 level.

For Hypothesis 2, on MLCU, analysis of variance data showed that there were no main effects of either: (a) RACE of adult or (b) SEX of adult on subjects' MLCU. No interaction effects occurred. Hypothesis 2 was, therefore rejected. For Hypothesis 3, on vocabulary diversity, the TTR was similar across all treatment groups showing no main effects of either: (a) RACE of adult or (b) SEX of adult on subjects' vocabulary diversity. There were no interaction effects. Hypothesis 3 was, therefore, rejected.

As shown on Table 2, for Hypothesis 4, there was a significant (beyond the .01 level) main effect of RACE of adult on subjects' use of Black English. Subjects talking with black adults used more than twice as many BE forms (16%) as did subjects talking with white adults (7%). There was no main effect of SEX of adult nor were there any interaction effects. However, the decided main effect of RACE of adult on the use of BE determined acceptance of Hypothesis 4.

TABLE 2

LANGUAGE PRODUCTION MEASURE: USE OF BLACK ENGLISH; NUMBER OF BLACK ENGLISH FORMS PER COMMUNICATION UNIT FOR A SEGMENT OF 100 COMMUNICATION UNITS OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE, ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE

Source	df	Mean Square	F	p <
Race of Interactor	1	.0825	9.1673	.0043*
Sex of Interactor	1	.0173	1.9170	.1739
SES of Subject	1	.0165	1.8336	.1833
Race x Sex	1	.0013	.1447	.7057
Race x SES	1	.0173	1.9170	.1739
Sex x SES	1	.0173	1.9170	.1739
Race x Sex x SES	1	.0003	.0280	.8680
Within Groups (error)	40	.0090		

*Significant beyond the .01 level.

For Hypothesis 5, there were no significant differences between Mid and Low SES groups on any of the three language measures. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was rejected.

Conclusions and Implications

To help visualize how the linguistic and social rule systems of the subjects were processed, the investigator refers to a theoretical model she designed. According to this framework, the child's social distance attitudes were formed during his affective development which is represented by the "affective mobilizers" dimension of the model. As the child acquired socio-cultural competence, he internalized a continuum of negative-positive feelings toward the social distance attributes of others. Every position of the negative-positive continuum was validated through his experiences in the real world.

Within the context of the "underlying communicative competence" component of the model, the investigator further posited that subjects have acquired two systems of underlying linguistic rules, one for standard English and one for Black English (bidialectal) and two underlying systems of social rules, one for white and one for black culture (bicultural). Subjects therefore readily controlled two dialects and two sociocultural domains and knew the co-occurrence rules of which dialect was appropriate to which situation.

While it was not an integral part of the study design , the researcher asked each adult to administer the SDSD to each subject, immediately after the audio-taped session ended. The child was instructed to fill out an SDSD response sheet after the adult left the room. The scales were the same as those on the SDSD administered earlier but instead of a felt portrait stimulus, the stimulus was "The Person I Talked With" (the adult). SDSD responses were uniformly within the positive range showing that the subjects in the study did not feel a great social distance betwen themselves and the adults.

This finding offered one interpretation for the results of no significant differences between groups on MLCU and on TTR. It further suggested that the child's underlying linguistic rule system governed his MLCU and TTR measures. But for the findings on the use of Black English, the investigator concluded that the child's underlying social rule system governed dialect switching which was clearly not a random occurrence. This interpretation was further supported by the fact that Black English served no conversational function in talking about television programs. On the contrary, inasmuch as black adults used standard English with the subjects and subjects selected programs whose characters used standard English the topic and the language used in the interaction actually demanded the use of standard English. Consequently, the greater use of Black English by subjects interacting with black adults indicated one way for the child to signify his feelings of solidarity with black adults in the experimental setting.

The finding of no significant differences between Mid and Low SES subjects on any language measure was

not surprising in view of the unavailability of subjects for the study who were within the upper range of the Mid SES category.

The Berkeley schools have been desegregated since 1968 and have therefore been social contexts in which bidialectal-bicultural speakers developed. When subjects used Black English, it did not depress their MLCU or TTR measures. These findings suggested that an integrated environment provided a setting for the naturalistic acquisition of language without the necessity of imposing stultifying language intervention programs upon children.

Social distance networks need to be structured to encourage a variety of verbal interactions among children. It should be more possible for teachers, not constrained by experimental controls , to create different social contexts within classrooms. Such classroom-tested networks might reveal which social contexts are most effective for which types of learning.

While no claims are made for the typicality of the subjects, the adults, the social contexts, or the findings of the study, the researcher generated new raw language data and contributed to the study of language in social context. Results of the study yielded information about the underlying communicative competence of the subjects.

SDSD PORTRAIT STIMULI

1 A MAN

2 A WOMAN

3 A MAN

4 A WOMAN

SDSD RESPONSE SHEET

NUMBER ___

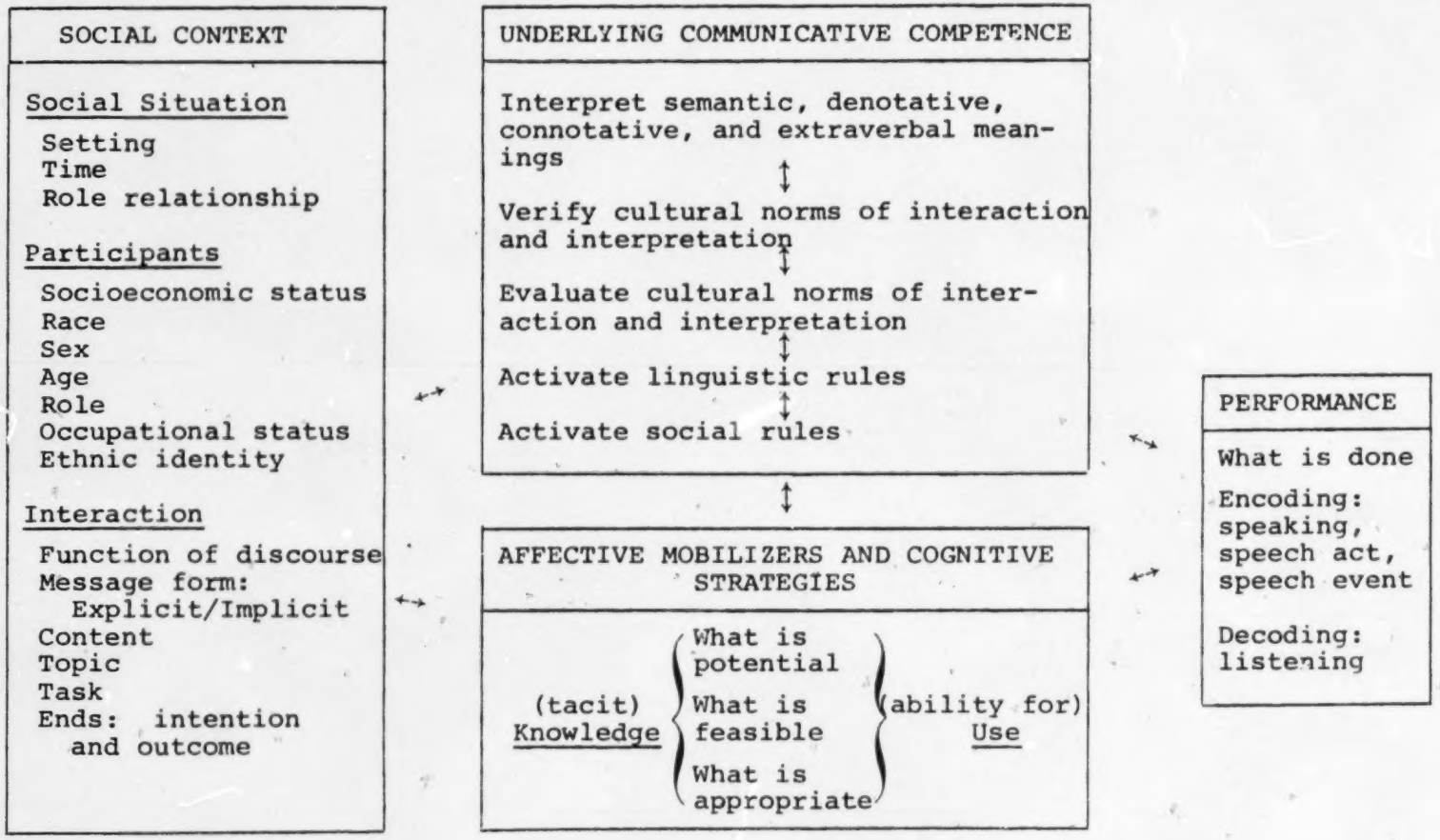
A. COOL ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ FOUL

B. UGLY ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ BEAUTIFUL

C. FRIENDLY ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ NASTY

D. UNFAIR ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ FAIR

LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL CONTEXT INTERACTION MODEL



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